

Wynton Marsalis Speaks About Louis Armstrong
at IS 227 (Louis Armstrong Intermediate School)
Spring 1997

Question: "Who's your idol?"

Wynton's reply:

Who's my idol? Well, Louis Armstrong, definitely.

You know, when I was growing up--I'm from New Orleans--and when I was growing up, my Daddy used to always say "Man, you need to listen to Pops," talking about Louis Armstrong. But you know, when I was growing up, Louis Armstrong was out of style. So I never wanted to listen to Louis Armstrong. Louis Armstrong was too old, I never wanted to hear that. It wasn't until I moved to New York. I was seventeen and my Daddy sent me a tape of all of Louis Armstrong's solos. He said, "Man, learn one of these solos and then call me back and tell me what you think about Louis Armstrong." Well, I let that tape sit up in my house for like eight months. And then one day, I don't even know why, I said, let me pull out this tape of Louis Armstrong and learn one of these solos real quick. I put that tape on, cause see, Louis Armstrong could play, he was so great that he made what he was playing sound easy. And I started learning the solo and I couldn't play it! So I said to myself well, now, what he's playing is not at all what it sounds like he's playing, because he's playing it. And from that moment on I started really trying to check Louis Armstrong out.

And Louis Armstrong's playing is so full of love and soul

and is so rich, that since that time it has really helped my trumpet playing become a lot better. And the older I get, the greater Louis Armstrong becomes. The more I know about music, the greater he becomes.

So those of you that go to the school that is named after Louis Armstrong, take advantage of the opportunity to listen to some of his music, and keep listening to it until you enjoy it because believe me, his music touched people all over the world. Once I was in Brazil, driving on the highway, going from one little town to another, and we were stopped on the road and there was some people digging, you know construction workers on the street. And our bus stopped next to this guy with a jackhammer, he stopped and he was wiping his head. He looked at us, and they kind of asked us in sign language what we were doing, and I said, you know, "Musicians," [Wynton mimics fingering a trumpet] and he went, "Aha! Louis Armstrong." And that's people all over the world that know the name of Louis Armstrong because he represented something of such human value and so much depth of feeling. So I really want you all to check out some Louis Armstrong whenever you get the chance.